

ALLOCATIONS POLICY AMENDMENTS

Report of the Deputy Chief Executive.

1 Introduction

- 1.0 Under Part 6 of the 1996 Housing Act, all local authorities are obliged to have a policy that outlines how they allocate their housing stock and make nominations to other accommodation providers. The last review of the policy in Stockport was in 2017 with the revised version introduced in 2018. While there have been no changes to the legal framework surrounding allocations in the interim, this report proposes some minor, incremental changes to reflect the policy environment, best practice in the field and new guidance in relation to members of the armed forces community¹. The changes outlined also take into account the main statutory guidance relating to homelessness, published in 2012².
- 1.2 The changes have the main aims of delivering:
- A more inclusive and supportive approach towards applicants disqualified from the housing register
 - An increased rehousing priority for two key groups: armed forces applicants and care leavers
 - Clarity in reflecting changed duties towards homeless applicants
 - Increased efficiency in letting homes quickly for the benefit of tenants and landlords
- 1.3 As with all changes to the Policy, at a minimum other registered housing providers need to be consulted, and guidance recommends this is extended to the public and other key partner agencies. Full consultation has been undertaken with all Stockport Housing Partnership Registered Providers. Any amendments also need to be approved by the Council's Cabinet prior to implementation.
- 1.4 This report outlines proposed amendments to the Allocations Policy which will form the basis of approval of the Housing Allocation Policy 2021 (Appendix 1) by the Council's Cabinet.

2. Proposed Changes

- 2.1 The changes relate to several areas of the policy:
- Eligibility criteria due to behaviour or rent arrears
 - Priority for armed forces applicants
 - Priority for care leavers
 - Wording in relation to homeless applicants following the introduction of the 2017 Homelessness Reduction Act
 - The length of the Homechoice 'bidding period'

¹ Improving access to social housing for members of the Armed forces – Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) June 2020. Available [here](#)

² Allocation of accommodation, guidance for local housing authorities in England (MHCLG) June 2012. Available [here](#)

- Resetting a goal of 75% of lets through Homechoice to reflect lower numbers of void properties becoming available.

2.2 There are also some general updates in text required to reflect changes to roles and teams delivering different functions, but which do not have a material impact upon the functioning of the policy.

2.3 *Eligibility criteria due to behaviour or rent arrears*

2.31 The 2011 Localism Act gives local authorities the power to disqualify people from the allocation of a property due to grounds such as poor behaviour or rent arrears. The Council's current policy reflects this by disqualifying those who have:

- Housing related debt to a social landlord in excess of £500 or subject to a court order
- Debt to a private landlord in excess of £1000 evidenced by a court order
- Exhibited criminal or anti-social behaviour making them unsuitable to be a tenant

2.32 While there is no aim to change these core categories, there is a proposal to amend the assessment process to:

- Outline the Council's commitment to support people so they can manage a tenancy effectively in the future as a principle of the policy
- Specify the requirement at decision and review stage to take disability into account and make 'reasonable adjustments' when determining whether rent arrears or behaviour should disqualify an applicant
- Offer money advice sessions to all applicants disqualified due to rent arrears with support and agreed repayment plans to clear debts
- Use of a risk assessment tool to help to consistently assess the potential risk posed by applicants with offences
- Offer personal housing and support plans through the Housing Options Team at Stockport Homes Group to all those disqualified from receiving an allocation.

2.33 The aim of these changes is to ensure that while those who pose a danger to other residents or staff, or an undue financial risk to housing providers are disqualified, there is a commitment to re-include people wherever possible. Avoiding long term exclusion of people with often complex needs is key to the reduction of homelessness, reoffending and demands upon health and social care services, and this change will help build upon ongoing multi-agency work to support this cohort.

2.4 *Priority for armed forces applicants*

2.41 The Policy provides 'additional preference' for people who have been in the armed forces at any point and are in urgent housing need. Under this clause, 10 additional rehousing points are applied to applicants who have 30 or more housing need points, with the aim of reflecting the Council's Armed Forces Covenant and its goal of supporting the Armed Forces Community. There has been a substantial amount of work in the Borough looking at how this commitment can be strengthened, and this proposal is aligned with other initiatives such as improving access to employment opportunities.

2.42 Reviewing the impact of the current policy, it has become apparent that due to the increase in demand for social housing and a decrease in supply in recent years, it can be difficult for applicants in real need who have been in the armed forces to be rehoused. As such, it is proposed to reduce the threshold of housing need points

where the additional priority is awarded to 25, and increase the amount applied to 20 points.

2.43 This would mean that armed forces applicants who are threatened with homelessness, or for example are 'sofa surfing' with friends or family would automatically receive the additional priority. This would impact upon a relatively small number of people, with only around 100 armed forces applicants on the register at any one time, but would give a significantly wider amount of choice for those the Council have a particular commitment to, and are over-represented amongst people who become homeless.

2.44 At present the additional priority only applies to people who have served in the armed forces, but the recommendation is to extend this to their partners where they have been living in services accommodation and left due to a relationship breakdown or bereavement. This would apply within five years after leaving accommodation, reflecting the longer-term disruption often associated by the families of those who have served.

2.45 In addition, it is recognised that the transition from the armed forces into civilian life can be particularly challenging, and this includes seeking employment. To support people in this position, it is recommended that additional priority for being in employment is applicable for 12 months after leaving the services irrespective of whether someone is working.

2.46 The combination of the measures outlined above will meet the wording and spirit of the new armed forces guidance in relation to allocations, providing additional support to the Community.

2.5 Priority for care leavers

2.51 Care leavers are another group that the local authority have a particular commitment towards with its 'corporate parenting' approach and are seeking to further support in their transition to independent living. As such, additional priority for those leaving care is awarded in the same way as for armed forces applicants, and the recommendation is to replicate the level of award as outlined above for armed forces applicants if in urgent housing need.

2.52 Again this affects a relatively small number of applicants, with many care leavers rehoused directly through protocols between Social Care and Stockport Homes, but means there is a stronger framework to ensure these applicants have a settled start in life.

2.6 Wording in relation to homeless applicants following the introduction of the 2017 Homelessness Reduction Act

2.61 Under the existing policy, there are four categories of priority for people who are homeless or faced with homelessness:

- Unintentionally threatened with homelessness
- Unintentionally homeless and in priority need
- Unintentionally homeless and not in priority need
- Intentionally homeless or threatened with homelessness

2.62 The 2017 Homelessness Reduction Act that was introduced in April 2018 amended the duties owed towards these applicants, and for practical allocation purposes these

could easily be equated to the existing policy. However, for full clarity, these will now be amended to:

- Homelessness prevention duty accepted
- Homelessness relief or main duty accepted (applicant not meeting priority need category)
- Homelessness relief or main duty accepted (applicant meeting priority need category)
- Homelessness prevention, relief or main duty accepted (but applicant having made themselves 'intentionally' homeless)

2.63 This does not affect the level of priority afforded to homeless people, or those threatened with homelessness, but means the categories fully reflect the duties as outlined in legislation.

2.7 *The length of the Homechoice 'bidding period'*

2.71 The Allocation Policy also needs to outline the process by which properties are allocated, which in Stockport is through Homechoice, the Council's Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme. This currently advertises available properties from a minute past Midnight every Wednesday morning through to 5pm the following Tuesday, with shortlisting of applicants then taking place from the Wednesday morning following the advert closing.

2.72 This advertising period is longer than most CBL schemes, and a review of lettings processes has revealed that this can result in properties remaining empty longer than necessary, with negative impacts for customers and the Council as the landlord. This is primarily where tenants return keys unexpectedly without giving four weeks notice, or direct offers of accommodation are refused at the last minute with no 'back up' list of applicants available. In these instances, if keys are returned just after the starting deadline for an advert, it can be almost two weeks before an applicant can be shortlisted and offered a property.

2.73 While this is inevitable to some degree, with applicants needing time to decide which homes they wish to apply for, shortening the advertising period by several days would limit the impact upon void times. This would help result in best use being made of properties, less risk of empty homes being vandalised and outgoing tenants not having to pay a full four week notice period if a property can be let more quickly. While a limited measure, with void turnaround times at Stockport Homes some of the best in the Country with homes turned around in less than two weeks, even relatively small changes can have an impact upon performance.

2.74 To avoid properties returned on a Wednesday or Thursday 'missing' an advertising period, it is proposed to start each weekly advert at 5pm on a Thursday with the closing time remaining at 5pm on the Tuesday. This would still leave five clear days for people to view the advert and place bids either on line or in person, with ample opportunity to look at properties they may be interested in. At present, over 80% of bids are placed within the first three days of an advert, and the 5% of people placing bids by telephone or through support officers would still have three full 'working' days to be in contact.

2.75 The impact upon void times would not be transformational, but any improvement is positive. Assuming one property a week was affected with five void days saved per

instance, it would still amount to 260 days over the course of a year. Benchmarking with other housing providers has suggested a similar approach has been adopted with no issues encountered.

2.8 *Resetting the goal of lets through Homechoice to 75%*

2.81 While the policy aims to maximise the number of allocations through CBL, there are circumstances where a direct offer needs to be made to an applicant. These include:

- To end a homelessness duty
- Where an applicant has the maximum priority for medical, welfare or social need and has not been successful through CBL
- Decants (e.g. floods, serious disrepair)
- Child protection or other exceptional cases agreed through 'Special Housing Panel'
- Protocols with Social Care, Housing First, Learning Disability Services

2.82 All direct offers are made fully in line with the published Allocation Policy and are subject to full audit. Their role is always to meet a specific legal duty, obligation of the local authority or exceptional housing circumstances signed off at a panel of senior managers from Stockport Homes, Social Care and Strategic Housing.

2.83 Historically, a target was set that these direct offers should account for around 10% of overall lets, however, this was never achieved and these allocations accounted for 30% of lets in 2019/20. An analysis of these lets has showed that they have been required, and the higher percentage is to some extent just the result of a gradual reduction in available properties over the years. To retain the goal of maximising the use of CBL, but reflecting the longer-term reality of supply, it is proposed to amend the nominal target to a maximum of 25% of total lets being direct offers and 75% through CBL. This will be achieved through the greater use of the private sector to discharge housing duties, and a review of all direct lettings.

3. Consultation Process

3.1 The 2019/20 Homechoice Survey asked questions in relation to the proposals with 96% (47 out of 87 respondents) agreeing with the eligibility changes, 80% (59/73) the increased priority for care leavers and 96% (84/87) the reduction in the bidding period.

3.2 Additionally, an e-shot to partner agencies and consultation with the Stockport Housing Partnership has been undertaken, with no alterations suggested.

4. Summary

4.1 The Council's current Allocation Policy was last amended in 2018, and the changes proposed do not substantially change the prioritisation it affords to the majority of applicants or its structure. However, they represent incremental development of the allocation process to make it more inclusive, effectively reflect the obligations towards the armed forces and care leavers, increase efficiency and ensure the Policy reflects best practice and is up to date with its drafting.

5. Recommendation

5.1 That the proposed changes are accepted.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

There are none

Anyone wishing to inspect the above background papers or requiring further information should contact Andy Kippax on Tel: 0161 474 4319 or by email on andy.kippax@stockport.gov.uk